



University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

GSE Publications

Graduate School of Education

January 2008

Educational Constructionisms

Stanton Wortham

University of Pennsylvania, stanton.wortham@bc.edu

Kara Jackson

University of Pennsylvania

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs

Recommended Citation

Wortham, S., & Jackson, K. (2008). Educational Constructionisms. Retrieved from http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/164

Postprint version. *Handbook of Constructionist Research*, edited by J. Holstein and J. Gubrium, pages 107-127. Reprinted with permission of The Guilford Press.

Copyright © 2008 The Guilford Press. All rights reserved under International Copyright Convention. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, or stored in or introduced into any information storage or retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the written permission of The Guilford Press.

Guilford Publications 72 Spring Street New York, NY 10012 212-431-9800 800-365-7006 www.guilford.com

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/gse_pubs/164

For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Educational Constructionisms

Abstract

Education is not a discipline, but a phenomenon. We conceptualize education as a fuzzy set of processes that occur in events and institutions that involve both informal socialization and formal learning. Various objects are constructed in educational processes, like the identities of teachers and learners, the subject matter learned and the social structures produced and reproduced. These objects are constructed through mechanisms that involve various levels of organization, including psychological, interactional, cultural and social elements. Constructionist approaches to education are important because they can help educators understand and change the highly enabling and constraining outcomes that educational processes have. Constructionist inquiries illuminate how learners' identities and competence, distinctions between valued and devalued subject matter, and the social organization of schooling are constructed, and in so doing they may help education better achieve its transformative potential.

Comments

Postprint version. *Handbook of Constructionist Research*, edited by J. Holstein and J. Gubrium, pages 107-127. Reprinted with permission of The Guilford Press.

Copyright © 2008 The Guilford Press. All rights reserved under International Copyright Convention. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, downloaded, or stored in or introduced into any information storage or retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the written permission of The Guilford Press.

Guilford Publications 72 Spring Street New York, NY 10012 212-431-9800 800-365-7006 www.guilford.com

Educational Constructionisms

Stanton Wortham
Graduate School of Education
University of Pennsylvania
3700 Walnut St.
Philadelphia, PA 19104-6216
stantonw@gse.upenn.edu

Kara Jackson
Graduate School of Education
University of Pennsylvania
karajack@dolphin.upenn.edu

Draft prepared for *Handbook of Constructionist Research*,
James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium, Editors

Manuscript submitted August, 2006
Revised and Resubmitted October, 2006

Education is not a discipline, but a phenomenon. We conceptualize education as a fuzzy set of processes that occur in events and institutions that involve both informal socialization and formal learning. Various objects are constructed in educational processes, like the identities of teachers and learners, the subject matter learned and the social structures produced and reproduced. These objects are constructed through mechanisms that involve various levels of organization, including psychological, interactional, cultural and social elements. Constructionist approaches to education are important because they can help educators understand and change the highly enabling and constraining outcomes that educational processes have. Constructionist inquiries illuminate how learners' identities and competence, distinctions between valued and devalued subject matter, and the social organization of schooling are constructed, and in so doing they may help education better achieve its transformative potential.

We organize our account of educational constructionisms around the objects and mechanisms that various accounts take as basic. As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1969) argues in *On Certainty*, no matter how attuned we are to the ongoing construction of reality, we must take some things for granted.

It might be imagined that some propositions, of the form of empirical propositions, were hardened and functioned as channels for such empirical propositions as were not hardened but fluid; and that this relation altered with time, in that fluid propositions hardened, and hard ones became more fluid. (p. 96)

In order to consider the indeterminacy that lurks within any apparent certainty, we must take other provisional certainties for granted. In Wittgenstein's metaphor, this means that we can never consider our experience as if all is fluid, without accepting some provisionally solid channels through which the fluid moves. Social constructionist accounts, then, must take some provisional certainties for granted as they analyze how other aspects of the social world are

constructed. As illustrated throughout this volume, and in other discussions (e.g., Gergen, 1994; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003), constructionisms vary in which certainties they implicitly or explicitly presuppose.

In our review of educational constructionisms, we attend to three dimensions along which diverse accounts make assumptions about stable aspects of the social world: (1) the object being constructed, ranging from individual identities to academic learning to institutionalized social structures; (2) the mechanism of construction, ranging from interactional construction, to local practices and beliefs, to more enduring social processes; (3) the timescale (Lemke, 2000; Wortham, 2006) of these objects and mechanisms, with each varying in the characteristic time interval at which relevant events happen. We summarize these dimensions in Table 1, with the object of construction represented along the horizontal axis and the mechanism of construction along the vertical, and with each dimension organized (left to right and top to bottom) from shorter to longer timescales.

=====Insert Table 1 about here=====

This table might imply that nine discrete types of educational construction exist. As we show below, some work on construction in education does focus on one cell or another in this table—describing how one type of object is constructed through a particular mechanism. More often, however, educational constructionisms describe how multiple objects and mechanisms are involved in any process of construction. Social identification, learning and social organization often influence each other, as people, groups and systems use multiple resources to accomplish multiple ends. The first major section below reviews accounts that focus on one cell. The

second major section presents accounts that more extensively combine various objects and mechanisms.

Focused Educational Constructionisms

In order to illustrate our heuristic for organizing educational constructionisms, we begin with accounts that fall more neatly into one or another of the cells in Table 1. No interesting account limits itself to one cell, but some accounts do focus primarily on one type of object and one type of mechanism. Table 2 shows the four accounts that we discuss in this section.

=====Insert Table 2 about here=====

Our descriptions of these four cases show how each does cite more than one object and/or more than one mechanism, but we argue that these accounts nonetheless focus primarily on one cell. This section reviews these four cases, both to provide several important examples of educational constructionism and in order to define more precisely what we mean by the six terms in our heuristic.

Local construction of identities: Eder

One cluster of studies focuses on the construction of social identities in school, emphasizing local meaning systems as the primary mechanism of construction (Eder, 1995; Kinney, 1993, 1999; Perry, 2002). We will use the work of Donna Eder to exemplify this cluster, and to illustrate what we mean by “social identities” as an object of construction and “local meaning systems” as a mechanism. In *School Talk*, Eder (1995) describes how middle school students develop social identities and relationships. She shows how middle school students at

one school use informal talk like stories and gossip to create stable ways of understanding themselves as types of people, and she focuses in particular to the construction of gendered identities. She argues, for example, that the proliferation of derogatory words for sexually active girls ("slut," "whore," and so on), and the relative absence of such terms for sexually active boys, normalizes male sexual desire and pathologizes female sexuality. She shows how students construct homophobia through the deployment of derogatory terms like "queer," as well as through ritualized stories that either praise hyper-masculinity and aggressive heterosexuality or insult other boys' lack of toughness. And she describes how boys construct women as objects through ritual stories of possession and conquest, and through insults in which they accuse other boys of failing to conquer girls sexually.

Eder's primary objects, then, are the social identities that students construct and adopt, especially their identities as types of boys and girls. She is also concerned with the social stratification that occurs around gender roles, and she suggests that the local construction of gender through informal talk plays a role in constructing more widespread social beliefs about gender. In this way she also treats social stratification as an object. But her claims about social stratification are limited to suggestions, in the opening theoretical section, that the local construction of identities across many sites will add up to more enduring social patterns. She does not provide empirical analyses of such enduring social stratification, and she would probably argue that analysts should not stray too far from the action of locally constructed identities in search of abstract structures. Her close attention to the construction of gender identities in one school shows how children's habitual acts and beliefs about gender sometimes follow predictable patterns that one might expect from knowledge of the larger society, but she

also shows how these acts and beliefs can take unexpected form as children construct alternative gender identities for themselves and others in local contexts.

The primary mechanism of construction in Eder's analysis, then, is the local meaning system—the emerging set of beliefs and practices about gender that girls and boys in this school both construct and are constrained by. She describes types of words, stories and insults that become routine and that characterize gender talk in this setting, and she argues that this informal talk "collectively create[s] various notions of what it means to be male or female" (p.2).

Habitual ways of talking about boys and girls in this setting lead to habitual beliefs about gender. Eder also describes the creative potential of interaction as a site for construction, and thus her analysis cites interactional mechanisms of construction as well as local ones. We argue that she is primarily concerned with local meaning systems because she does not study the details of actual interactions, in which a single event can take unexpected turns and in which the meaning of the event is often in doubt. She focuses instead on habitual ways of interacting, which sediment in a local setting like a middle school and which thereby construct habitual senses of what it means to be male and female. Eder's account is certainly compatible with a focus on discrete interactional events, and work on interactional mechanisms of construction would complement hers.

Interactional construction of learning: Macbeth

We can see the difference between local meaning systems and interactional work as mechanisms of educational construction—as well as the potential compatibility between these mechanisms—by examining an account that focuses more on interactions. In “Classrooms as installations: Direct instruction in the early grades,” Douglas Macbeth (2000) describes how

students' learning of academic content is accomplished through interactional work in the classroom. He describes, for example, how students come to spell the word "evaporation" over several minutes in a kindergarten spelling lesson. While he agrees that most of the individual students would probably falter if asked to spell the word evaporation individually, he shows how they produce the correct spelling as a group. He analyzes how students learn not only what sounds particular letters make, but also what spelling as a classroom activity entails (e.g., repetition, overlapping sounds, parsing words). Macbeth thus describes how the whole class accomplishes both the spelling of the word "evaporation" and a feeling that the correct spelling is "everyone's achievement" (p. 31). For Macbeth, academic learning is constructed by drawing on multiple resources—in this case, other students, posters on the wall, and a song they learned to help them remember how to spell the suffix "-tion"—that are brought together in a particular event and allow academic success.

Macbeth's primary object is the construction of academic learning. He is peripherally concerned with the social identities that are afforded as learning unfolds within the classroom. For example, he shows how a kindergarten child gets constructed as "fluent" in Spanish through a particular sequence of teacher-student talk. Overall, however, Macbeth focuses on the production of the "local curriculum," on how academic content learned within the classroom involves both an understanding of particular subject matter and an understanding of what it means to learn that content in a classroom context.

Such academic learning is primarily constructed through interactional mechanisms, in events that unfold over seconds and minutes, in which students learn particular academic subject matter like spelling, fractions or Spanish. Talk is of primary importance in Macbeth's analyses, but he also includes other resources, including gestures and material objects. Like Eder, he

recognizes that local meaning systems help to organize the interactions that construct particular sorts of learning. Unlike Eder, however, Macbeth focuses on how sometimes unpredictable interactions constitute local orders. Macbeth analyzes how interactional events unfold in the classroom and how the sometimes unexpected course of such events helps construct students' learning of particular content. Macbeth also acknowledges the historical location and sociocultural roots of what happens in classrooms. Teacher-student talk in classrooms is a particular sort of discourse that has evolved over decades and has recognizable patterns. The classrooms Macbeth studied manifest such patterns, but he argues that the actual shape of any classroom event is somewhat indeterminate. The crucial work of construction happens as events that have the potential to count as various sorts of interaction—exemplary learning, failure to learn, learning of one thing but not another, etc.—come to accomplish something recognizable. Because of this indeterminacy at the interactional level, the learning that is accomplished is in important ways unique to individual events.

Interactional construction of identities: Erickson and Shultz

Like Macbeth, Frederick Erickson and Jeffrey Shultz (1982) focus on the details of discrete interactions and the construction accomplished through interactional work. Unlike Macbeth, they study how this interactional work helps construct individual social identities. Their study explores gatekeeping encounters between junior college counselors and students from diverse economic, racial and ethnic backgrounds—encounters in which the counselors can make evaluations or recommendations that might redirect a student's educational and career trajectory. They show how counselors and students accomplish educational sorting, as they negotiate their relatively brief discussions. Central to these encounters is the question of who the

student is—as a student, as a future worker, as a person. In a ten-minute interview, the counselor must form an impression of the student's motivation, abilities, character and aspirations.

Erickson and Shultz show how counselors do this only as they and the student negotiate the course of their interaction. Like all encounters, they argue, these gatekeeping events have an ecology: various aspects of the participants' appearance, background and actions are relevant to what occurs, as well as both verbal and nonverbal signs, documents and the layout of physical space. They trace how some of these potentially relevant components become salient to the ecology of any particular conversation, such that it becomes smooth and ends in approbation or becomes erratic and ends with disillusionment.

For their object, then, Erickson and Shultz focus on individual social identities. The junior college students become recognizable kinds of people in these gatekeeping encounters, as the counselors rely on the tone of the interaction and their emergent judgments about students' identities to recommend or impose various educational paths. Erickson and Shultz are also concerned about social stratification as an object. They argue that counselors and students often "reenact and revivify a small piece of the social and cultural order of society at large" (p.12). They study gatekeeping encounters because these represent key moments in students' careers, in which educational institutions sort out academic successes and failures, and thus they are concerned to study how academic success and social stratification are constructed. They nonetheless focus on individuals' identities as their primary object, arguing that social stratification exists only as it is constructed and reconstructed in individual cases.

Erickson and Shultz thus focus on interactional construction as the primary mechanism through which student identities are constructed. Counseling encounters do not have locally or institutionally determined courses. Instead, the course of any interaction emerges over seconds

and minutes, as the counselor and the student negotiate positions and present themselves in sometimes unexpected ways. Erickson and Shultz' account emphasizes the creative production of relevance in interaction. Both local and broader social patterns are crucial to understanding any interaction, but these only become relevant as participants make them relevant in particular instances. If we were to focus on enduring social organization as the mechanism of construction, we would expect that socially institutionalized or culturally sedimented categories of identity would largely determine the outcome of gatekeeping encounters. But Erickson and Shultz show that demographic categories like race, although sometimes crucial, must be made relevant, and can be made irrelevant, by the contextualized actions of individuals in interaction. They acknowledge that established cultural norms, practical constraints and institutionalized roles and practices all limit participants' opportunities for renegotiating interactions. But they show that, nonetheless, both counselors and students must improvise in order to establish which of the many possibly relevant social categories and expectations will become salient in a given interaction. They also show how counselors and students can disrupt habitual expectations and establish unexpected identities for themselves. Their overall findings show that situationally emergent identity is more important than demographic identity, although either can be crucial in any given event. Participants selectively reveal aspects of their identities, such that interaction can yield unexpectedly relevant identities in context.

Social organizational construction of social stratification: Oakes

Eder, Macbeth and Erickson and Shultz show how individual identities and academic learning can be constructed through interactional and local mechanisms. Each of these accounts also suggests that interactional and local work can contribute to more stable social stratification.

(See also Marlaire and Maynard (1990) for research that highlights the interactional construction of social organization.) But other accounts argue that social stratification gets constructed more through enduring social organization than through moment-to-moment or local action. Research which focuses on institutional mechanisms of construction describes how “natural” ways of imagining and stratifying students are in fact socially constructed (e.g., Bernstein, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1977). These constructionist approaches show how widespread, habitual practices both reproduce and legitimate social stratification. To illustrate how these accounts take social stratification as an object of construction and enduring social organization as a mechanism, we describe Jeannie Oakes’ (1985) work on ability grouping.

Oakes (1985) describes how “tracking,” the sorting of students into different academic or vocational groups, results in unequal opportunities to learn and helps construct hierarchal social relationships. Her study draws on a comprehensive data set that includes 25 junior and senior high schools from socioeconomically diverse locations. Oakes analyzes several data sources: school district information on the tracking practices in these 25 schools, particularly in English, mathematics, and vocational education classrooms; surveys about teacher and student attitudes toward the quality of instruction and climate; and observations of the quantity of instructional time across tracked classrooms. She concludes that students in high tracks are exposed to “high status knowledge” and greater opportunities to learn, while students in lower tracks are provided with “low status knowledge” and fewer opportunities to learn. These differences result from differential “provision of time to learn” as well as differential “quality of instruction provided” (p. 111). High-track students spend more time in classrooms working toward learning goals (e.g., critical thinking) while low-track students spend more time working toward behavioral goals (e.g., listening to directions and study habits). Oakes’ data show that students cannot

easily move between tracks, and she argues that decisions regarding track placements are made arbitrarily, often based on counselors' and teachers' flawed impressions of students' potential.

Oakes takes as her object the construction of social stratification. Through tracking practices, students are given qualitatively and quantitatively unequal educational opportunities and experiences. These differences, Oakes argues, both reflect and perpetuate class- and race-based inequities from the larger society. Poor children and minority children are more likely to be placed in lower tracks than their middle-class and white counterparts, and they receive an education that limits their academic and career opportunities. Furthermore, differential classroom practices legitimate inequality in society. Students who receive minimal opportunities to learn and focus on behavioral norms of deference maintain this sort of relationship with other institutional structures in society, while those who are encouraged to be independent and are given greater opportunities to learn are better prepared to occupy higher social positions. By describing the "natural order of schools" (p. 192), Oakes thus shows how social stratification is constructed through institutionalized educational practices like tracking.

Oakes cites enduring social organization, not interactions or local meaning systems, as the primary mechanism of educational construction. She begins with a history of the emergence of tracking as an institutionalized practice. This helps to situate tracking as a phenomenon that emerged sociohistorically. Following from the work of other social reproduction theorists (e.g., Bernstein, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Rist, 1970; Willis, 1977), Oakes argues that the sorting of students into tracks and the divergent practices that characterize tracked classrooms organize students in ways that reproduce the hierarchal order of society. Oakes recognizes that tracking may play out differently in specific interactions and local contexts. However, unlike Eder, Macbeth, and Erickson and Shultz, her analyses do not focus on

contingent events or distinctive local settings. She focuses instead on how groups of individuals come regularly to fill institutional slots which appear to be structurally determined.

Hybrid Educational Constructionisms: Four Important Topics

Each of the four cases described above focuses on one object and one mechanism. We have used these cases to introduce our heuristic for mapping educational constructionisms, and to illustrate the six objects and mechanisms represented in Table 1. Even these focused cases, however, touch on several objects and mechanisms—aiming to explain how different types of objects are constructed together through one process, or how a given object is constructed through a complex set of mechanisms. Most accounts of social construction in education describe more than one object and/or rely on more than one type of mechanism. This section illustrates how various combinations of object and mechanism work, by focusing on four topics around which many important studies cluster: the construction of marginality, stratification, literacy and personhood. These topics do not provide a comprehensive taxonomy of work in educational construction. They simply allow us to show how four important types of educational objects are constructed and how different accounts rely on multiple objects and multiple mechanisms, in various combinations.

The construction of educational marginality

As Philip Jackson (1968) observes, schools must deal with "crowds, praise and power." In order to manage the crowds, they often sort students into groups. Because schools praise students for meeting academic and behavioral standards, the resulting groups are often hierarchically organized—with some groups praised as fulfilling the mission of the institution

and others criticized for failing to do so. Using their power over students, educators often marginalize the "failing" groups. Such marginalized students reside in "special education" classes, "alternative" schools and similar places, where they are often labeled as "disabled," "disruptive," "unintelligent" or "failing." Many have studied how marginality is constructed in educational institutions and interactions, and this work has shown that educational marginalities do not generally result from inherent characteristics of individuals or groups.

Betsy Rymes (2001) studies how students in an alternative high school both adopt and resist identities as marginal students. She describes typical "dropping out" and "dropping in" autobiographical stories, through which students in the alternative school construct senses of self and reject or embrace formal education. She does not describe speakers as passively invoking habitual patterns, however. Widely circulating, recognizable stories are resources that educators and learners use, and sometimes transform, as they construct particular identities in context. Rymes shows how students from the alternative school reproduce, contest, ridicule and otherwise reconstrue typical dropping out and dropping in stories. Sometimes they even contest the distinction between students who have embraced and rejected school, thereby positioning themselves in unpredictable ways with respect to linguistic, ethnic and economic stereotypes.

Rymes takes individual social identities as the object of her analysis. She is also concerned with the social stratification that disadvantages students like the poor, minority youth she worked with, but she analyzes how such stratification gets invoked and sometimes inverted as students construct their social identities. She describes how both interactional and local mechanisms facilitate this construction. Her analyses trace the sometimes unexpected ways that both marginalized and mainstream speakers interactionally position and reposition themselves with respect to more widely circulating models of identity. She also shows how, in the local

setting of one alternative school, educators and students develop relatively stable practices and beliefs that become resources for subsequent interactions. Her analyses thus focus on indeterminacies and emerging identities at both the interactional and the local levels.

Like Rymes, Michelle Fine (1991) studies “dropouts,” through a year-long ethnographic study at a comprehensive urban high school. Fine describes institutional practices that label and punish low-income minority adolescents who do not conform to school expectations. She documents both institutional and local practices that silence critique and mask the seriousness of the dropout problem. These practices include tracking and retention policies, as well as the school’s ability to blame individuals for dropping out. In addition to documenting these exclusionary practices, Fine also describes dropouts’ own stories of how they came to drop out. As with Rymes’ alternative school students, many of Fine’s dropouts are critical of the public schools and see their rejection of schooling as a critique of the system. They recognize the contradictions in educational rhetoric about educational attainment and economic prosperity. Fine argues that the availability of “dropout” as a category allows schools to purge these critically-minded students from the system. The schools rid themselves of those who question them.

Rymes (2001) and Fine (1991), then, both take as their object the social identity of “dropout” and how this category of identity helps schools reproduce the marginalization of youth who are structurally disadvantaged in the larger society. While Rymes’ analysis relies on a combination of interactional and local mechanisms, however, Fine’s account focuses on local meaning systems and enduring social practices that together produce both the identity of “dropout” and the processes through which this category of identity functions to preserve the status quo. (Like Fine, Signithia Fordham (1996) and Nancy Lopez (2003) provide accounts of

how local practices and enduring structures together construct the social identities of marginalized minority youth).

Other work on the construction of educational marginality also takes social identities as the object of construction, but describes how interactional and enduring structural mechanisms can work together. Jane Mercer (1973), for instance, describes how children are assigned to the category “mentally retarded” by schools and other institutions. She finds that “schools not only labeled more persons as mentally retarded than did any other formal organization but also held the most central position in the network of formal organizations in the community dealing with mental retardation” (p. 96). Mercer argues that the criteria used to define someone as “retarded” rely tacitly on an Anglocentric norm, carried especially through IQ tests. A disproportionate number of black, Latino and low income children become “mentally retarded” because their knowledge and styles do not conform to the tacit norm. In addition to describing the enduring structural bias of the IQ test, Mercer also describes how individuals do interactional work to apply the IQ test in practice, and thus she begins to show how enduring structures and interactional work can function together as mechanisms of construction.

Ray McDermott (1993), Hugh Mehan (1996) and Hervé Varenne and McDermott (1998) offer more complex accounts of how interactional work constructs both marginal identities and social stratification. Mehan (1996), for example, analyzes how educators produce the "clarity of labeled social facts" out of the "ambiguity of everyday life" (p.255), focusing on how students come to be seen as "special education" or "disabled." He analyzes the routine bureaucratic work of producing opportunities for individuals to become special education students, exploring the three stages of referral, educational testing and placement, and exploring how texts like teacher notes and testing reports move across contexts and organize subsequent opportunities for

identifying students. Similarly, McDermott (1993) and Varenne and McDermott (1998) describe how routine school practices produce categories of marginal identity that we assume some individuals must occupy, even if it takes significant work to apply the categories to diverse individuals. Mehan, Varenne and McDermott thus focus both on "disability" as an attribute of individuals and as a social category with a history. The social category has been constructed across decades and centuries (cf. Hacking, 1990). No matter how robust, however, this category must be made relevant in particular situations, as Erickson and Shultz (1982) also argue. Construction happens within interactions as well as across historical time, as widely circulating identities are assigned to individuals in practice.

Mehan (see also Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996) thus describes a complex set of mechanisms that construct both individual identities and social stratification, as individuals are identified as "disabled." Instead of proposing either interactional construction or enduring social organization as the primary factor, he cites both mechanisms. But he also moves beyond a simple combination of the two. He explores various realms that influence "disabled" and "at-risk" students' school success and failure—ranging from tendencies and actions of the student him or herself, to parents' stances and actions, habitual activities in the classroom, the organization of the school, peer group practices and attitudes, the community's beliefs about education, as well as national educational policy and broader socioeconomic constraints. Instead of describing "micro" and "macro," either alone or together, Mehan and his colleagues describe how resources from many different spatial and temporal scales together facilitate or impede students' academic success. They give a more complex account of how "disability," "intelligence," "educational success" and other identities are constructed in practice, describing how resources from various layers of social context come together to facilitate a given student's

path. The relevant mechanism is not just interaction, or local regularities, or social organization, but interactions among aspects of all three.

The construction of educational stratification

As described by Jackson (1968) and others, educational institutions spend significant time sorting students into groups, often in ways that generate hierarchy. There are several ways in which educational processes contribute to and/or perpetuate social stratification. Some are institutional (e.g., grading, tracking) while others are more local (e.g., teachers' choosing particular students to participate more than others). In the last section we reviewed Oakes' (1985) work on tracking, a widespread educational phenomenon that helps construct stratification. In this section, we review research on the construction of educational stratification that more centrally involves multiple objects and mechanisms.

Some accounts focus on the construction of social stratification as their primary object and cite a combination of two mechanisms, interactions and enduring forms of social organization. Pierre Bourdieu's research on the French education system (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979) provides a classic model of "social reproduction," describing how educational institutions reproduce social divisions by credentialing students who come to school possessing more symbolic and economic capital. Formal education, Bourdieu argues, is a largely middle class institution and its practices reflect this. Children from middle and upper class backgrounds are more likely to succeed than their lower class peers, because the practices and dispositions developed in middle and upper class homes align more easily with school practices. Students who display habits associated with the middle and upper classes advance, and those who do not

tend to do poorly—not because educators consciously discriminate against some students, but because students with unfamiliar habits seem less intelligent and less refined.

Bourdieu's account does not rely simply on enduring social organization—on the differential allocation of capital across social classes—to explain social stratification, because of his concepts of *habitus* and improvisation. *Habitus* refers to durable, embodied dispositions that are developed mostly in primary socialization (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). *Habitus* is not deterministic. Individuals tend to act in accordance with these dispositions, but any interaction involves improvisation and the potential for uncharacteristic actions. One important example of *habitus* is linguistic, the tendency to speak in characteristic ways. Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1979) show, for example, that professors in the top French schools tend to award better grades to those students who come from middle and upper class backgrounds in part because these students demonstrate linguistic practices (e.g., they use phonological patterns associated with middle class French speakers) that mark those students as being “fit” for education. Students come to school with speech patterns that reflect their variable upbringings. Professors do not explicitly say (or even recognize) that they tend to prefer students who speak in particular ways. Their evaluative actions (e.g., grading) nonetheless correlate with the linguistic practices of students. Moreover, because the school conceives itself as a meritocratic institution, lower class students then fault themselves for failing and middle class students believe they have succeeded because they are more intelligent. What appears to many as a natural way to classify individuals (“intelligent” versus “dumb”; “successful” versus “unsuccessful”) is actually a socially constructed phenomenon that serves to perpetuate class-based social stratification.

Annette Lareau (2000; 2003) follows Bourdieu's theoretical model in key respects. Lareau's *Home Advantage* (2000) analyzes social class and parental involvement in elementary

education. Her ethnographic study of white working class and middle class first grade children describes parent-child, child-teacher and parent-teacher interactions. Lareau shows how middle class families have access to more cultural capital and deploy this capital effectively to further their children's education. They know more educators as a function of their middle class occupations and their own formal education, they understand formal educational practices and institutions and they know how to request special privileges for their children. Upper middle class families tend to believe that both the family and the school are responsible for a child's formal education, whereas working class families tend to believe that education is the job of schools and not families. Middle class parents thus tend to be involved in school as teachers expect (even though teachers do not always welcome parents' demands), and their children benefit educationally. Teachers tend to characterize working class parents as uninvolved, even though these parents deeply care about their children's educational futures. Lareau also describes how working class families make their children feel distant from and, at times, afraid of school, whereas middle class families teach their children to speak up and demand individualized attention.

Lareau focuses on social stratification as her object. Like Bourdieu, she cites both interactional and social organizational mechanisms—although both Bourdieu and Lareau present enduring social organization as the more central mechanism. Lareau shows how middle class parents accomplish educational advantage for their children by navigating interactions successfully, but she also describes how typical patterns do not always occur and how parents encourage their children to be more and less demanding of teachers in both typical and atypical ways. Lareau connects these sometimes-unpredictable interactional moments to larger class-based patterns of interaction and to the enduring social organization of schooling. Her analysis

thus moves between these two levels to explain the educational advantages that middle class children tend to have over their working class peers.

Somewhat more than Bourdieu and Lareau, Aaron Cicourel and John Kitsuse (1963) describe how the “daily transactions between school personnel and students” (p. 134) contribute to the construction of stratification, and thus they include interactional mechanisms more centrally in their analysis. Cicourel and Kitsuse focus on the distinction between “college prep” and other tracks, and on the role of guidance counselors in accomplishing this stratification. They argue that educational sorting can be explained by “the patterned activities of the organization and not in the behaviors of students per se” (p. 9). Counselors classify students using relatively arbitrary criteria that have been established by the educational bureaucracy, and in most cases this enduring social organization sorts students in predictable ways. Cicourel and Kitsuse do describe instances, however, in which school personnel struggle to label a particular student, like when a student has a low GPA but scores high on a standardized test. In such cases counselors must improvise and sometimes make unexpected judgments—claiming, for example, that there is a problem with the student rather than with the sorting system, that the student’s low GPA reflects his “laziness,” rather than a flaw in the tracking system and that the student should be placed in a lower track. Like Oakes, then, Cicourel and Kitsuse describe regular institutional practices that produce predictable hierarchies. Their account of the mechanisms by which this happens is more varied, however. Cicourel and Kitsuse focus on the relationship between day-to-day counselor-student interactions and the institutional practices which organize these interactions. This combination of mechanisms allows for cases in which the school assigns an unexpected category of identity to a student.

Bourdieu, Lareau and Cicourel and Kitsuse focus primarily on social stratification as their object. They do describe categories of identity that people use to identify individuals, but they focus on widely circulating categories and practices and do not spend much time describing how these categories are applied to individuals. Other work takes widespread social stratification as one object but also attends more closely to how categories of identity get applied to individuals at shorter timescales, across days and months in particular schools. Ray Rist (1970), Ben Rampton (2005) and Penelope Eckert (2000) fall into this group. Their work also combines mechanisms to explain the construction of individual identities and social stratification, describing how enduring social organization alone cannot explain how either individual identities or social stratification is accomplished in local and interactional contexts.

Drawing on symbolic interactionist methods, Rist follows a cohort of black inner-city students from kindergarten through second grade. He describes how the kindergarten teacher put children in reading groups that persisted for three years and that corresponded closely to the social class backgrounds of the children's families. Within the first few days of kindergarten, the teacher evaluated each child as either a "fast" or a "slow" learner. The teacher made these evaluations based on her image of an "ideal" learner, which included characteristics she saw as linked to success in school and adult careers. Once she sorted the children, she spoke and acted in distinct ways with the various groups. She called on the "fast learners" more and praised them, while she ignored the "slow learners" during academic tasks and focused on correcting their behavior. Furthermore, the "fast learners" adopted the teacher's stance toward the "slow learners." Thus, Rist argues, the classroom reflected and served to reinforce broader social stratification.

Rist focuses both on individual identities and on social stratification, and on the interconnections between these two objects. Educators draw on widely circulating, stratifying categories of identity, which Rist argues are class-based, as they organize classrooms. When they apply these categories to individual students, both teachers and children help reproduce the class structure of the larger society. The mechanisms of construction for Rist centrally include local practices and meaning systems. The local work of developing groups and routines draws on and contributes to enduring social organization. Unlike Oakes, Rist's data show lived instantiations and distinctive local manifestations of larger class-based norms. Like Oakes, however, Rist does not investigate how people resist social organization in particular interactions.

Rampton (2005; see also Hall, 2002) describes the "hybrid" identities that are increasingly emerging as people and media images move around the world. His work on language "crossing" in urban, multiethnic groups of adolescents illustrates a combination of objects (both identity and social stratification) and mechanisms (both interaction and enduring structures). Crossing is the use of words or other linguistic features from one or more other languages in the course of an utterance. Rampton studies the use of Panjabi, Carribean Creole and Stylized Asian English by white, South Asian and Carribean youth in the U.K. He does not argue simply that minority languages are devalued and used to stigmatize non-mainstream youth, nor that such youth use their home languages to resist such discrimination. Both of these processes, among others, do occur, but Rampton studies how various social effects are achieved in practice. Crossing is a "discursive strategy" in which diverse youth contest and create relations around race, ethnicity and youth culture. The use of terms from a minority language does not have one or two fixed meanings—like stigma or resistance—because particular uses

involve contestation, teasing, resistance, irony and other stances with respect to the larger social issues surrounding minority identities in Britain.

Rampton focuses on how individuals adopt and play with individual identities in practice, but he is also deeply concerned about how the cultural politics of difference can disadvantage minority youth, and he describes the larger social and political forces regimenting language, identity and politics in the U.K. He does not reduce disadvantage to predictable forms of identity politics, in which certain signs of identity routinely signal negative stereotypes, however. He shows instead how youth use language to navigate among the conflicting forms of solidarity and identity available to them in multiethnic Britain. Thus the mechanism of construction for him includes interactional work, as well as the shifting social organization of language and identity in multiethnic locations like London.

Eckert (2000) describes how student identities can turn out in ways that we would not predict from their social positions. She studies how teenagers use phonological variants—different ways of pronouncing the "same" sound, in ways that often mark relative social status—in order to establish and sometimes transform their identities and relationships. She comes from a ("variationist") tradition that correlates different pronunciations with different social locations, and she provides systematic analyses of how boys and girls, middle and working class students use different pronunciations. Using data from a suburban high school, she shows how students identify each other and mark themselves by using characteristic phonological variants. But she also shows how, in practice, students often deploy variants in unpredictable ways. "I have looked away from the 'big' picture, to see how us 'little' people use variation to both find and make our way in the world, and in the process connect to, and create, the big picture" (p. xiv). Eckert takes both individual identities and social organization as objects. She studies how

widely prevalent oppositions like "jock" and "burnout," and large-scale phonological regularities that hold across regions of the U.S., manifest in one school. But she also studies how both predictable and unpredictable individual identities emerge through the deployment and inversion of such regularities.

Eckert thus argues that apparently stable and homogeneous social stratification is more variable than a primary focus on the mechanism of enduring social organization would lead us to believe. "Masculinity," "heterosexuality," "sluttiness" and other social categories are constructed in practice instead of being stable prior to instances of language use. Eckert does not abandon social organization as mechanism, but she explores how more widespread regularities are deployed in unexpected ways. She also shows how one school has distinctive local phonological patterns, which cannot be derived from more widespread patterns and must be uncovered through ethnographic and sociolinguistic explorations of the local site. Her mechanism of construction thus includes social resources that manifest in distinctive local ways and are deployed interactionally to create distinctive identities, against the background of enduring social organization.

The construction of literacy

The third of our topics for constructionist educational research involves the construction of literacy. Literacy has traditionally been conceived as a set of context-independent reading and writing skills (Street, 1993) and has been used as a marker to distinguish more and less "civilized" peoples (Gee, 1990/1996; Street, 1993). Constructionist research calls these assumptions into question, arguing that literacy and an individual or group's identity as "literate" or "illiterate" are not stable and self-evident skills. See, for example, Holstein (1983) which

illustrates how evaluators of essays construct college students' as (in)competent writers based on local, subjective knowledge, yet claim their evaluations are "objective". Work on the construction of literacy tends to include multiple objects and mechanisms. "Literacy" as a category and a set of practices has been used to construct larger scale marginality and has thus contributed to social stratification. Accounts of literacy also describe the social construction of academic learning, as well as the construction of individual identities. Different researchers have accounted for the construction of literacy with different combinations of the three mechanisms in our heuristic.

Brian Street (1984; 1993; 2001; 2005) was one of the first to show systematically how literacy is socioculturally constructed. He argues that, contrary to popular notions, literacy is not a universal set of cognitive skills that people either acquire or do not. Rather, Street (2001) claims that "literacy is a social practice, not simply a technical and neutral skill; that it is always embedded in socially constructed epistemological principles....Literacy in this sense is always contested, both its meanings and its practices, hence particular versions of it are always 'ideological', they are always rooted in a particular world-view" (pp. 7-8). Street's work has generated a subfield of literacy research called "New Literacy Studies" that explores the socially constructed nature of literacy.

The traditional model of literacy, which Street calls the "autonomous" model, has guided most formal educational practice. Following such a model, educators classify a particular way of reading and writing as literate, and individuals get classified as either literate or illiterate based on a narrow view of what counts as literacy. Street argues that, on the contrary, all literacy practices are "ideological" and that a more accurate account of literacy should take into account that there are many literacy practices. People in different social and cultural locations use text

for various purposes and as part of various activities, many of which do not proceed with the sort of autonomous decoding that most schools assume. Furthermore, Street argues, the literacy practices expected and taught in schools tend to reflect the practices of those in power. Street's argument here fits with the work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1979), Shirley Brice Heath (1983) and others who show how schools expect children to enact and learn literacy practices that are associated with the dominant group. People are identified as more and less literate only against a background of "normative" literate practices. Nonmainstream ways of using text appear "deviant" against this background, even though people may accomplish their ends quite well through such alternative literacies. It appears that some progress is being made in the world of educational practice on this issue, however. Street's (2005) most recent edited collection describes several formal educational contexts which explicitly recognize the multiple literacy practices of their marginalized students, and in doing so allow their students both to cultivate multiple ways of using texts and to construct powerful senses of their literate selves.

Street's work spans all three objects in our heuristic—the construction of social identities, learning, and social stratification. Literacy involves individual learning, as people are taught to accomplish tasks that involve reading and writing. While learning to read and write, individuals get socially identified as more or less literate, and this identification contributes to the social stratification accomplished in and by schools. For Street, the mechanisms of construction are local and social organizational. He is interested in the local social practices associated with diverse forms of literacy, and with how these more local literacies are judged against widely circulating, institutionalized ideologies about official, schooled literacy.

David Barton and Mary Hamilton (1998) describe how reading and writing are complex activities woven into local places and relationships. They show that literacy is social, local and

often "vernacular." Instead of viewing literacy as a modular set of skills that individual minds acquire, Barton and Hamilton follow Street in conceiving the basic unit of literacy as social practices. For reading and writing to occur successfully, various resources must contribute: thoughts, texts, physical settings and tools, relationships with others, and so on. Stripping away the context and focusing only on lexicon, grammar and decoding would miss these other resources that are essential for actual literacy events to have the meaning they do. By studying literacy practices and events in one English city, Barton and Hamilton show how local knowledge, relationships and activities are important to the reading and writing that people accomplish there. They show how the political writings of one person, for example, are embedded in individual and neighborhood histories. These texts could not have been written and cannot be fully understood out of this context. Barton and Hamilton also focus on "vernacular literacy practices...which are not regulated by the formal rules and procedures of dominant social institutions and which have their origins in everyday life" (p.247). Vernacular literacy practices do not follow the paradigms of schooled reading and writing but nonetheless use reading and writing successfully to accomplish local aims. Sometimes, such practices allow structurally disempowered people to accomplish political aims.

In their account, then, Barton and Hamilton take both individual identities and learning as objects. They describe the literacy life stories of several individuals, tracing their experiences with various literacy practices in and out of school. They show how literacy practices have been important for these people's identities, as they became more and less "educated," "refined" and "successful." They also show how people's ability to participate in literacy events does not depend mainly on discrete cognitive skills, but instead on a configuration of resources, including physical and symbolic tools, others' knowledge, and so on. Barton and Hamilton account for the

construction of identity and learning primarily through local mechanisms, describing the local character of literacy practices in Lancaster, the specific relationships, histories, political agendas and other contexts which shape how people read and write there. They also describe more enduring social organization, like the enduring relationship between schooled literacies and social position, and the corresponding devaluation of vernacular literacies, but they focus on the local.

James Collins and Richard Blot (2003) focus more on social stratification as an object and enduring social organization as a mechanism, but their account is nonetheless broadly compatible with Street and Barton and Hamilton. Collins and Blot describe how literacy practices are embedded in global processes like colonialism and neo-liberalism and institutionally-anchored power relations. They analyze interdependencies between local uses of literacy and larger sociohistorical movements—describing, for instance, the hegemony of the literate standard and how this has provided cultural capital to some and disadvantaged others. They argue against the common assumption that schooled literacy will provide intellectual and economic salvation for less literate peoples in all cases, showing instead how this assumption devalues nonstandard literacies and has been used to justify exploitation.

Collins (1996) also provides a more structural account, describing the ideology of "textualism," which holds that texts and meaning are fixed and that individuals acquire discrete skills that allow them to decode these meanings. Schooling takes the textualist ideology for granted, but Collins argues that this ideology masks the social stratification accomplished through schools' assignment of more and less "literate" identities to students. Collins also describes how the typical processes of social reproduction are interrupted sometimes, as classroom interactions have unexpected results. He analyzes conversations from a low reading

group, for instance, and shows how calling out can be understood as disruptive and as an indicator of less talented students. But he also shows how calling out can on other occasions be interpreted by both teacher and students as supportive, as an indication that a student understands and wants to work collaboratively with others. Collins thus analyzes the construction of both individual identities and social stratification, and he does so with reference to social organizational and interactional mechanisms.

The construction of educational personhood

As Martin Packer has argued, education is not only epistemological but also ontological (Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). When students learn subject matter they do more than change their cognitive states. They also become different kinds of people—the kinds of people who would think about the subject matter in that way, who would engage in the cognitive practices required to learn as the school teaches. Schools favor one set of cognitive practices and thus tend to produce a kind of person who, for example, favors decontextualized knowledge over knowledge embedded in craft and apprenticeship activities. Schooling is not just about cognitive development, then, but also about the construction of persons. The ontological character of education means that, when students learn things in school, both academic learning and the construction of individual identities occur. Most research on the construction of persons explores how academic learning and individual identities are constructed together, citing interactional, local and organizational mechanisms. Some of this work also describes the construction of social stratification (e.g., Packer, 2001).

“Cultural-historical activity theory” provides a comprehensive framework for conceptualizing how both social identification and social stratification play important roles in

academic learning and the co-occurring development of personhood (e.g., Cole, 1996; Engeström, 1999). This tradition, which draws on and expands Lev Vygotsky's (1934/1987) work, attends to phylogenetic, sociohistorical, cultural and situational resources for and constraints on learning. Activity theorists study how humans have evolved to be as dependent on sociohistorical artifacts, like symbolic tools and cultural models, as on neuropsychological capabilities. Humans differ from animals because human evolution can proceed very rapidly through socially acquired artifacts and ideas that extend our phylogenetically evolved capacities—without having to wait for genetic change to establish new ways of acting or thinking. On this account, learning necessarily involves socioculturally located artifacts. Such artifacts are differentially distributed, depending on the social location of teachers and students. As shown by Oakes and Lareau, for example, certain ways of approaching problems are taught in high track but not low track classes and in middle class but not lower class homes. Learning to use these socioculturally located artifacts not only facilitates certain cognitive activity but also identifies the learner as someone who would use those sorts of tools. Approaching domestic problems in a school-based, decontextualized way, for instance, could cause tension with relatives from cultural traditions that do not favor decontextualization and efficiency. Thus individual learners are identified socially as they learn to use certain approaches and resources to solve cognitive problems.

Activity theorists take individual social identification and learning as their objects. They present local practices and meaning systems as one mechanism that plays a central role in facilitating learning and identification. Yrjö Engeström (1993), for instance, describes the use of various artifacts and resources in local workplaces, as people learn to solve problems in their jobs. Activity theorists also focus on the developmental trajectories along which individuals

travel as they learn to solve more complex problems. Such trajectories are composed of events, each involving an individual or group using some tools to accomplish an object, but activity theorists do not generally focus on the emergence of unpredictable patterns within events. Instead, they analyze the emergence of unpredictable developmental trajectories as individuals move across ontogenetic time. And, as activity theorists describe individuals navigating these trajectories, they show how individuals draw on social resources that are woven into more enduring social organization. Activity theory thus proposes a comprehensive set of mechanisms through which learning and identity are constructed, including all three mechanisms in our heuristic. As Michael Cole (1996) puts it, “human cognition [is] the emergent outcome of transformations within and among several developmental domains: phylogenetic history, cultural history, ontogeny and microgenesis” (p. 147).

Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave (2001) also provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the construction of persons through educational and other activities. One chapter in their edited collection, by Steven Gregory (2001), describes how social class identities do not simply reflect preexisting categories, but are instead “formed and reformed through political and cultural practices that occur at multiple sites in community life” (p. 141). Gregory describes how the social class identities of African American community activists emerged from contentious practices as they both learned and struggled with each other at church, in the neighborhood, in political organizations and elsewhere. As they learned to participate in politics, these community activists changed who they were in some respects, and thus Gregory describes the connections between individual identity development and learning in an out-of-school context. The identities and experiences of particular individuals depended on the enduring struggles in play at a given time, but their “social class” took on particular meaning and force only in the context of the local

practices and struggles relevant in the local setting. Gregory shows how a focus on enduring struggles and/or contingent events, as givens apart from the local context, would fail to capture how social identification actually happened.

Like the activity theorists, Holland and Lave propose complex mechanisms through which social identities are constructed. They describe the “mutually constitutive nature” of enduring social struggles that involve categories like social class, together with individuals’ acts in educational and other settings. Practices are sociohistorically produced, but they are not merely derived from publicly circulating models and institutional processes. Holland and Lave redescribe sociohistorical models and structures in terms of “enduring struggles” between and among people, groups and institutions in order to emphasize how they are contested and constituted in practice. Events and actions can intervene in and transform these struggles, but such events and acts are always mediated by more widely circulating sociocultural patterns that are invoked in particular events.

Like Holland and Lave, Kevin Leander (2002) describes interconnections between learning and social identification, and the interconnections between enduring organization and more contingent sites of practice. Leander, however, provides a more detailed account of how social identities “are stabilized during the course of interaction” (p. 198). Following Erickson and Shultz (1982), Mehan (1996) and others in arguing that any interaction might yield a broad range of social identities for an individual, Leander examines how more stable identities are established in practice as participants react to each other in classroom events. Leander analyzes how one African American student is socially identified and identifies herself as “ghetto” in an American Studies class. He shows that her emerging identity is constructed as participants mobilize various “identity artifacts.” These include “any instrument (material, tool, embodied

space, text, discourse, etc.) that mediates identity-shaping activity” (p. 201). Just as there are many identities that an individual might inhabit in any interactional event, there are also many resources that could be recruited to help stabilize these emerging identities. In the case that Leander describes, classroom participants draw upon a classroom banner, different descriptions of black Americans, different students’ histories, and how students are spatially arranged in the classroom in order to suggest and then stabilize Latanya's identity as a “ghetto” person.

Leander thus focuses on social identities as his object. Interaction is his primary mechanism of construction, but he offers a more complicated account of how interaction works to produce stable identities. The identity artifacts that are recruited, produced, and configured in particular ways carry with them local, historical, and institutional connotations and affordances. As the activity theorists describe, the institutional location of such resources colors the people who use these resources, and Leander traces the more complex relations among widely circulating and locally emergent meanings. Thus he describes a mechanism of construction that includes both interactional and more enduring social mechanisms.

Stanton Wortham (2006) describes how social identification and academic learning can deeply depend on each other, both through a theoretical account of the two processes and a detailed empirical analysis of how students’ identities emerge and how students learn curriculum over a year in one classroom. His analysis traces the identity development of two students in a ninth grade urban classroom, showing how they came habitually to occupy characteristic roles across an academic year. He also traces two major themes from the curriculum, showing how students came to make increasingly sophisticated arguments about them. The analysis shows in detail how social identification and academic learning became deeply interdependent in this classroom. The two students developed unexpected identities in substantial part because

curricular themes provided categories that teachers and students used to identify them. And students learned about those curricular themes in part because the two students were socially identified in ways that illuminated those themes.

Wortham's analysis emphasizes local models that specify the different types of "student" one might be in this classroom, describing distinctive gendered models that emerged across several months. These local models both drew on and transformed more widely circulating models, and both students and teachers used them in sometimes-unexpected ways in classroom interactions. The two focal students' identities emerged as speakers transformed more widely circulating models of race and gender into local models of appropriate and inappropriate studenthood, and as they contested individual students' identities in particular interactions. Wortham thus takes social identities and academic learning (and their interrelations) as objects, and describes both local and interactional mechanisms through which these objects are constructed.

Conclusion

Educational institutions and processes are in some cases powerfully restraining and in others powerfully liberating. Constructionist research in education has the potential to help practitioners make their work more liberating and less restraining, in at least three ways. First, by working against essentialist notions of student identity, constructionist accounts can help students, educators, parents and others avoid "deficit" models of students' potential and appreciate the power education has to construct more productive identities for students. Second, by working against naturalized versions of social stratification, constructionist research can help us appreciate alternative ways that we might work to organize our educational institutions and

our broader social relations in more just ways. Third, by working against essentialist notions of learning, constructionist research can help students and educators appreciate the social situatedness and the complexity of cognitive activities and the curriculum. Kenneth Gergen and Stanton Wortham (2001) describe more concretely how a social constructionist view of knowledge could guide educational enterprises along these lines, recommending several pedagogical innovations like “greater democracy in negotiating what counts in educational practice, the local embedding of curricula, the breaking of disciplinary boundaries, the lodgement of disciplinary discourses in societally relevant practices, educational practice in societal issues and a shift from subject and child centred modes of education to a focus on relationships” (p. 136).

Our account of educational constructionisms in this chapter has illustrated the diversity of approaches that researchers have taken toward these three ends, focusing on several objects and mechanisms of constructionism. We explicitly do not claim that our heuristic covers all potentially relevant approaches, or that our review touches all important traditions. We have not, for instance, been able to discuss constructionist work on dialogic approaches to teaching and communication (e.g., Buttny, 1993) or epistemological arguments about constructivism (von Glasersfeld, 1995). We also caution against rigid use of Table 1, imagining that the two dimensions exhaust all relevant distinctions or that individual cells can capture the essence of complex accounts. Despite its limitations, however, the heuristic illuminates various educational constructionisms, showing how constructionist accounts attend both to objects and to mechanisms and showing how more than one object and mechanism can be combined in a coherent account.

References

- Barton, D., & Hamilton, M. (1998). *Local literacies*. New York: Routledge.
- Bernstein, B. (1977). *Class, codes and control*. London: Routledge.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1977). *Reproduction in education, society and culture* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.
- Bourdieu, P., & Passeron, J.-C. (1979). *The inheritors: French students and their relation to culture* (R. Nice, Trans.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America*. New York: Basic Books.
- Buttny, R. (1993). *Social accountability in communication*. London: Sage.
- Cicourel, A. V., & Kitsuse, J. I. (1963). *The educational decision-makers*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.
- Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Collins, J. (1996). Socialization to text. In M. Silverstein & G. Urban (Eds.), *Natural histories of discourse* (pp. 203-228). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Collins, J., & Blot, R. (2003). *Literacy and literacies: Texts, power, and identity*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.
- Eckert, P. (2000). *Linguistic variation as social practice: The linguistic construction of identity in Belten High*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers.
- Eder, D. (1995). *School talk: Gender and adolescent culture*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Engeström, Y. (1993). Developmental studies of work as a testbench of activity theory: The case of primary care medical practice. In S. Chaiklin & J. Lave (Eds.), *Understanding*

- practice: Perspectives on activity and context* (pp. 64-103). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.
- Engeström, Y. (1999). Activity theory and individual and social transformation. In Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen & R.-L. Punanaki (Eds.), *Perspectives on activity theory* (pp. 19-38). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Erickson, F., & Shultz, J. (1982). *Counselor as gatekeeper: Social interaction in interviews*. New York: Academic Press.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing dropouts: Notes on the politics of an urban public high school*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Fordham, S. (1996). *Blacked out: Dilemmas of race, identity, and success at Capitol High*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Gee, J. (1990/1996). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses*. London: Routledge.
- Gergen, K. (1994). *Realities and relationships: Soundings in social construction*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gergen, K., & Wortham, S. (2001). Social construction and pedagogical practice. In K. Gergen (Ed.), *Social construction in practice* (pp. 115-136). London: Sage.
- Gregory, S. (2001). Placing the politics of black class formation. In D. Holland & J. Lave (Eds.), *History in person* (pp. 137-170). Santa Fe: School of American Research Press.
- Hacking, I. (1990). *The taming of chance*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hall, K. D. (2002). *Lives in translation: Sikh youth as British citizens*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Holland, D., & Lave, J. (Eds.). (2001). *History in person: Enduring struggles, contentious practice, intimate identities*. Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press.
- Holstein, J. A. (1983). Grading practices: The construction and use of background knowledge in evaluative decision-making. *Human Studies*, 6, 377-392.
- Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (2003). A constructionist analytics for social problems. In J. A. Holstein & G. Miller (Eds.), *Challenges and choices: Constructionist perspectives on social problems* (pp. 187-208). Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Jackson, P. (1968). *Life in classrooms*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Kinney, D. A. (1993). From nerds to normals: The recovery of identity among adolescents from middle school to high school. *Sociology of Education*, 66(1), 21-40.
- Kinney, D. A. (1999). From "headbangers" to "hippies": Delineating adolescents' active attempts to form an alternative peer culture. In J. A. McLellan & M. J. V. Pugh (Eds.), *The role of peer groups in adolescent social identity: Exploring the importance of stability and change* (pp. 21-35). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Lareau, A. (2000). *Home advantage: Social class and parental intervention in elementary education*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Leander, K. (2002). Locating Latanya: The situated production of identity artifacts in classroom interaction. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 37, 198-250.

- Lemke, J. L. (2000). Across the scales of time: Artifacts, activities, and meanings in ecosocial systems. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 7(4), 273-290.
- Lopez, N. (2003). *Hopeful girls, troubled boys: Race and gender disparity in urban education*. New York: Routledge.
- Macbeth, D. (2000). Classrooms as installations: Direct instruction in the early grades. In S. Hester & D. Francis (Eds.), *Local educational order: Ethnomethodological studies of knowledge in action* (pp. 21-71). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Marlaire, C. L., & Maynard, D. W. (1990). Standardized testing as an interactional phenomena. *Sociology of Education*, 63, 83-101.
- McDermott, R. (1993). The acquisition of a child by a learning disability. In S. Chaiklin & J. Lave (Eds.), *Understanding practice: Perspectives on activity and context* (pp. 269-305). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Mehan, H. (1996). The construction of an LD student. In M. Silverstein & G. Urban (Eds.), *Natural histories of discourse* (pp. 253-276). Chicago: University of Chicago.
- Mehan, H., Villanueva, I., Hubbard, L., & Lintz, A. (1996). *Constructing school success: The consequences of untracking low-achieving students*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Mercer, J. (1973). *Labeling the mentally retarded: Clinical and social system perspectives on mental retardation*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Packer, M. J. (2001). *Changing classes: School reform and the new economy*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Packer, M. J., & Goicoechea, J. (2000). Sociocultural and constructivist theories of learning: Ontology, not just epistemology. *Educational Psychologist*, 35(4), 227-241.
- Perry, P. (2002). *Shades of white: White kids and racial identities in high school*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Rampton, B. (2005). *Crossing* (2nd ed.). Manchester, UK: St. Jerome Publishing.
- Rist, R. (1970). Student social class and teacher expectations: The self-fulfilling prophecy in ghetto education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 40(3), 411-451.
- Rymes, B. (2001). *Conversational borderlands: Language and identity in an alternative urban high school*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Street, B. V. (1984). *Literacy in theory and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. V. (Ed.). (1993). *Cross-cultural approaches to literacy*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Street, B. V. (Ed.). (2001). *Literacy and development: Ethnographic perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Street, B. V. (Ed.). (2005). *Literacies across educational contexts: Mediating learning and teaching*. Philadelphia: Caslon Publishing.
- Varenne, H., & McDermott, R. (1998). *Successful failure: The school America builds*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- von Glasersfeld, E. (1995). *Radical constructivism: A way of knowing and learning*. London: Falmer Press.
- Vygotsky, L. (1934/1987). *Thought and language* (A. Kozulin, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*.

Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.

Wittgenstein, L. (1969). *On certainty*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.

Wortham, S. (2006). *Learning identity: The joint emergence of social identification and academic learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Table 1. Dimensions along which educational constructionisms make assumptions about stable aspects of the social world

<i>What's constructed (object) ►</i> <i>How (mechanism) ▼</i>	Individual Social Identity	Individual Learning	Social Stratification
Interaction			
Local meaning systems or practices			
Enduring social organization			

Table 2. Focused accounts of social construction in education

<i>What's constructed (object) ►</i> <i>How (mechanism) ▼</i>	Individual Social Identity	Individual Learning	Social Stratification
Interaction	Erickson & Shultz	Macbeth	
Local meaning systems or practices	Eder		
Enduring social organization			Oakes

Stanton Wortham is the Judy and Howard Berkowitz Professor and Interim Dean at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. He also has appointments in Anthropology, Communications and Folklore. He has written on classroom discourse and the linguistic anthropology of education, applying techniques from linguistic anthropology to uncover social positioning in apparently neutral talk. His books *Acting out participant examples in the classroom* (John Benjamins, 1994), *Linguistic anthropology of education* (Praeger, 2003, coedited with Betsy Rymes) and *Learning identity: The joint emergence of social identification and academic learning* (Cambridge University Press, 2006) explore interrelations between the official curriculum and covert interactional patterns in classroom discourse. He has also studied interactional positioning in media discourse and autobiographical narrative, and he has developed methodological techniques for analyzing narrative, media and other everyday discourse. His book *Narratives in Action* (Teachers College Press, 2001) explores how storytelling can partly construct the narrator's self and develops systematic methodological techniques for doing discourse analysis. More information is available at <http://www.gse.upenn.edu/~stantonw>.

Kara Jackson is a doctoral candidate in Education, Culture, and Society at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education and a fellow at MetroMath: The Center for Mathematics in America's Cities, a center devoted to the improvement of mathematics teaching and learning in urban areas. Her dissertation research is an ethnographic study of individuals' and their families' participation in numeracy practices, which conceptualizes processes of mathematics learning and achievement as involving socialization across in- and out-of-school contexts.